

SUICIDE:

Taking Care of Yourself & Your Family

After an Attempt

**Family Guide for
Your Relative in
the Emergency
Department**



The Nation's Voice on Mental Illness

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Family Guide for Your Relative in the Emergency Department

It is devastating to have a suicidal family member and to live with the feelings that go with this kind of traumatic anxiety. That is why this guide was developed for you. It will give you some important points on how to take care of yourself and your family member following a suicide attempt and will provide you with resources to help you move forward.

What Happens in the Emergency Department

Goal

The goal of an emergency department visit is to get the best outcome for a person at a time of crisis—resolving the crisis, stabilizing the patient medically and emotionally, and making recommendations and referrals for follow-up care or treatment. There are several steps in the process, and they all take time.

When someone is admitted to an emergency department for a suicide attempt, a doctor will evaluate the person's physical and mental health. Emergency department staff typically look for underlying physical problems that may have contributed to the suicidal behavior, such as side effects from medications, untreated medical conditions, or the presence of street

drugs that can cause emotional distress. While emergency department staff prefer to assess people who are sober, they should not dismiss things people say or do when intoxicated, especially comments about how they might harm themselves or others.

Assessment

After your family member's physical health is evaluated, a mental health assessment is usually performed, and the physician doing the exam should put your relative's suicidal behavior into context. The assessment will generally focus on three areas:

1. What psychiatric or medical conditions are present? Are they being or have they been treated? Are the suicidal thoughts and behavior a result of a recent change or are they a longstanding condition?
2. What did the person do to harm him or herself? Have there been previous attempts? Why did the person act, and why now? What current stressors, including financial or relationship losses, may have contributed to this decision? Does the person regret surviving the suicide attempt? Is the person angry with someone? Is the person trying to reunite with someone who has died? What is the person's perspective on death?
3. What support systems are there? Who is providing treatment? What treatment programs are a good match for the person? What does the individual and family feel comfortable with?

Finally, a doctor may assess in more detail the actual suicide attempt that brought your relative into the emergency department. Information

that the treatment team should look for includes the presence of a suicide note, the seriousness of the attempt, or a history of previous suicide attempts.

What the Emergency Department Needs to Know: How You Can Help

Confidentiality and Information Sharing

Family members are a great source of history and are often key to the discharge plan.

Provide as much information as possible to the emergency department staff. Even if confidentiality laws prevent the medical staff from giving you information about your relative, you can always give them information. Find out who is doing the evaluation and talk with that person. You can offer information that may influence the decisions made for your relative.

Inform the emergency department personnel if your relative has:

- access to a gun, lethal doses of medications, or other means of suicide
- stopped taking prescribed medicines
- stopped seeing a mental health provider or physician
- written a suicide note or will
- given possessions away
- been in or is currently in an abusive relationship
- an upcoming anniversary of a loss
- started abusing alcohol or drugs
- recovered well from a previous suicidal crisis following a certain type of intervention

If you ever again have to accompany your relative to the emergency department after an attempt, remember to bring all medications, suspected causes of overdose, and any names and phone numbers of providers who may have information. Emergency department personnel should try to contact the medical professionals who know the situation best before making decisions.

Other important information about your relative's history to share with the emergency department staff include:

- A family history of actual suicide—mental health professionals are taught to pay attention to this because there is an increased risk in families with a history of suicide.
- Details about your relative's treatment team—a recent change in medication, the therapist is on vacation, etc. This information is relevant for emergency department staff because if they do not feel hospitalization is best, they need to discharge your family member to a professional's care.
- If the person has an advance directive¹, review this with the emergency department treatment team; if you have a guardianship, let them know that as well.

¹ Advance directives are legal documents that allow someone to give directions for future medical care, or designate another person to make medical decisions if one is unable to competently make such decisions. For more information, contact the National Association of Protection and Advocacy Systems, Inc. (NAPAS) at 202-408-9514 or www.napas.org.

You may want to get permission from the staff and your relative to sit in on your relative's evaluation in the emergency department to listen and add information as needed. Your role is to balance the emergency department staff's training and the interview of the patient with your perspective. The best emergency department decisions are made with all the relevant information.

Next Steps After the Emergency Department

After your relative's physical and mental health are thoroughly examined, the emergency department personnel will decide if your relative needs to be hospitalized—either voluntarily or by a commitment. If hospitalization is necessary, you and your family can begin to work with the receiving hospital to offer information and support and to develop a plan for the next steps in your relative's care. If commitment is necessary, the hospital staff should explain this legal procedure to you so that you have a clear understanding of what will take place over the next three to ten days while a court decides on the next steps for treatment.

A couple of things to note—there is a bed shortage in many parts of the country and it may take quite a while to locate a hospital that can accept your family member. Additionally, if your relative does not speak English, he or she may have to wait for an interpreter. It is generally not a good idea to use a family member to interpret in a medical situation.

If the emergency department's treatment team and your family member do not feel hospitalization is necessary, then you and your

family member should be a part of developing a follow-up treatment plan. In developing a plan, consider the following questions:

| Questions to Ask About Your Relative's Follow-up Treatment Plan | |
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| <i>Ask your family member:</i> <i>(it is okay to be honest and direct with your questions and concerns)</i> | <i>Ask the treatment team:</i> <i>(this includes your family member's doctor, therapist, nurse, social worker, etc.)</i> |
| Do you feel safe to leave the hospital and are you comfortable with the discharge plan? | Do you believe professionally that my family member is ready to leave the hospital? |
| How is your relationship with your doctor and when is the next appointment? | Why did you make the decision(s) that you did about my family member's care or treatment? |
| What has changed since your suicidal feelings or actions began? | Is there a follow-up appointment scheduled? Can it be moved to an earlier date? |
| What else can I/we do to help you after you leave the emergency department? | What is my role as a family member in the safety plan? |
| Will you agree to talk with me/us if the suicidal feelings return? If not, is there someone else you can talk to? | What should we look for and when should we seek more help, such as returning to the emergency department or contacting other local resources and providers? |

Remember: It is critical to schedule a follow-up appointment as soon as possible after your relative's discharge.

What You Need to Know

Make safety a priority for your relative recovering from a suicide attempt. Research has shown that a person who has attempted to end his or her life has a much higher risk of later dying by suicide. Safety is ultimately an individual's responsibility, but often a person who feels suicidal has a difficult time making good choices. As a family member, you can help your loved one make a better choice while reducing the risk.

Reduce the Risk at Home—To help reduce the risk of self-harm or suicide at home, here are some things to consider:

- Guns are high risk and the leading means of death for suicidal people—they should be taken out of the home and secured.
- Overdoses are common and can be lethal—if it is necessary to keep pain relievers such as aspirin, Advil and Tylenol in the home, only keep small quantities or consider keeping medications in a locked container. Remove unused or expired medicine from the home.
- Alcohol use or abuse can decrease inhibitions and cause people to act more freely on their feelings—as with pain relievers, keep only small quantities of alcohol in the home, or none at all.

Create a Safety Plan—Following a suicide attempt, a safety plan should be created to help prevent another attempt. The plan should be a joint effort between your relative and his or her doctor, therapist or the emergency department staff, and you. As a family member, know your relative's safety plan and understand your role in it, including:

- Knowing your family member's "triggers" such as an anniversary of a loss, alcohol, or stress from relationships.

- Building supports for your family member with mental health professionals, family, friends, and community resources.
- Working with your family member's strengths to promote his or her safety.
- Promoting communication and honesty in your relationship with your family member.

Until you know the safety plan and feel comfortable with the plan, it is best not to have your relative return home. Remember that safety cannot be guaranteed by anyone—the goal is to reduce the risk and build supports for everyone in the family.

Maintain Hope and Self-Care—Families commonly provide a safety net and a vision of hope for their suicidal relative, and that can be emotionally exhausting. Never worry alone—get support from NAMI and friends, and get professional input whenever possible. Use the resources on the back pages of this brochure, the internet, or family and friends to help you create a support network. You do not have to travel this road alone.

Moving Forward

Emergency department care is by nature short-term and crisis oriented, but some longer-term interventions have been shown to help reduce suicidal behavior and thoughts. Talk to your relative's doctor about medications and treatments for mental illnesses that may help to reduce the risk of suicide for people diagnosed with illnesses such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or depression. Often, these illnesses require multiple types of interventions and your relative may benefit from a second opinion from a specialist. If your relative abuses alcohol or other drugs, it is also very important to seek

help for this problem along with the suicidal behavior. Seek out a substance abuse specialist or groups like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or Narcotics Anonymous (NA) to help your loved one; Al-Anon may be a good resource for you as a family member.² If it is available in your area, an integrated treatment program like ACT (Assertive Community Treatment) may provide better outcomes than traditional care for some severely ill individuals.³

Ultimately, please reach out for help in supporting your family member and yourself through this crisis. See the back pages of this pamphlet for a list of hotlines, information and support organizations to help you and your family member move forward with your lives.

To learn more about suicide and to get help, consider the following resources.

In a crisis, contact:

1-800-273-TALK (8255)

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

A 24-hour, toll-free crisis hotline funded by the federal government that will direct callers to a nearby crisis center. The Lifeline will accept calls from non-English speakers.

www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

² Contact Alcoholics Anonymous at 212-870-3400 or www.aa.org; contact Narcotics Anonymous at 818-773-9999 or www.na.org; contact Al-Anon (or Alateen for youth) at 757-563-1600 or www.al-anon.alateen.org.

³ To learn more about ACT, contact NAMI at 1-800-950-NAMI (6264) or www.nami.org/act.

For more information about suicide and mental illness:

American Association of Suicidology

A resource and education organization dedicated to the understanding and prevention of suicide.

www.suicidology.org or call 202-237-2280

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

Dedicated to advancing the public's knowledge of suicide and its prevention.

www.afsp.org or call 1-888-333-AFSP

American Psychiatric Association

A national advocacy organization of psychiatrists.

www.psych.org or call 703-907-7300

American Psychological Association

A national advocacy organization of psychologists.

www.apa.org or call 1-800-374-2721

Befrienders International/Samaritans

An online resource that gives support through e-mail and offers a directory of local crisis helplines.

www.befrienders.org

**The Covenant House Neline Hotline–
1-800-999-9999**

A 24-hour toll-free crisis hotline offering confidential and immediate crisis intervention and referrals to community resources.

www.covenanthouse.org/programs_nl.html

**Hispanic Community Resource Helpline–
1-800-473-3003**

(La Linea Nacional de Ayuda)

Offers support for Latinos who need information about educational, health and human service providers.

Link's National Resource Center for Suicide Prevention and Aftercare (LINK-NRC)

Provides suicide-related community education in the areas of prevention, intervention, aftercare and support.

www.thelink.org or call 404-256-9797

NAMI (The National Alliance on Mental Illness)

Offers information, support, and advocacy for persons affected by mental illnesses.

www.nami.org or call 1-800-950-NAMI (6264)

National Institute of Mental Health

NIMH is the lead federal agency for research on mental and behavioral disorders.

www.nimh.nih.gov or call 1-866-615-6464

The National Mental Health Association

Addresses all aspects of mental health and mental illness.

www.nmha.org or call 1-800-969-NMHA (6642)

The National Organization for People of Color Against Suicide

Addresses and raises awareness about the epidemic of suicide in minority communities.

www.nopcas.com or call 1-866-899-5317

National Strategy for Suicide Prevention

A comprehensive national plan to confront the suicide epidemic.

www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/suicideprevention

Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE)

Dedicated to preventing suicide through education, public awareness and stigma reduction.

www.save.org or call 952-946-7998

Suicide Prevention Action Network USA

A national organization dedicated to action and advocacy around suicide prevention.

www.spanusa.org or call 202-449-3600

Suicide Prevention Resource Center

Supports suicide prevention with the best of science, skills and practice.

www.sprc.org or call 1-877-GET-SPRC (438-7772)

The Trevor Helpline– 1-866-4U-TREVOR

A national 24-hour, toll-free suicide prevention hotline aimed at gay and questioning youth.

www.thetrevorproject.org

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What is NAMI?

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) is the national umbrella organization for more than 1,200 local support and advocacy groups in all 50 states for families and individuals affected by serious mental illness.

A grassroots, self-help organization, NAMI is dedicated to improving the lives of people with severe, biologically based brain disorders. Our mission is to provide education about severe mental illnesses and to support increased funding for research and quality services. Members of NAMI are families, friends, and people suffering from severe mental disorders such as depressive illness.

To learn more about your local NAMI group, call your state's NAMI office, contact the NAMI Information and Services Center at 1-800-950-6264 or write to:

NAMI

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Other information can be found by visiting our web site, www.nami.org.

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